

## Chapter 6

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# Sustaining the School Improvement Process

*Communication seems to work best when it is so direct and so simple that it has a sort of elegance.*

—John Kotter (1996, p. 89)

*You cannot have students as continuous learners and effective collaborators, without teachers having the same characteristics.*

—Michael Fullan (1993, p. 46)

Educators who have laid the foundation of an improving organization by articulating their school's mission, vision, values, and goals can and should celebrate their accomplishments. But they must also recognize that they have merely taken the first few steps on the long journey to transforming their schools into professional learning communities. Schools have demonstrated time and again that it is much easier to initiate change than to sustain it to fruition. Until changes become so entrenched that they represent part of "the way we do things around here," they are extremely fragile and subject to regression.

Although charismatic leaders or influential committees can help generate initial enthusiasm for change, neither can sustain the change process over time. A school will experience a fundamental shift only when its members can generate a sufficient number of supporters for new ideas and practices. The challenge of sustaining the change effort to transform schools into professional learning communities is the challenge of developing a critical mass of teachers who are prepared to function as change agents (Fullan, 1993). The keys to developing this "critical mass" of educators within a school are found in the three Cs of sustaining an improvement initiative—communication, collaboration, and culture. This chapter examines communication and collaboration. Culture is addressed in Chapter 7.

### **Sustaining the Change Initiative through Communication**

Effective communication is an essential component of the change process. The importance of communication has been cited as "the one major lesson that has emerged from the extensive research studies on innovation," and the pathways for communication within an organization have been described as "the veins and arteries of new ideas" (Kouzes & Posner, 1987, p. 56). Conversely, insufficient attention to communication has been cited as one of the most common causes of the failure of change initiatives (Kotter, 1996). Mission, vision, values, and goals will become irrelevant, and the change process will stall unless the significance of these building blocks is communicated on a daily basis throughout the school. Volumes of philosophy statements, strategic plans, and long-range goals have been written by school districts, only to end up gathering dust in file cabinets as educators continue with business as usual. The same fate awaits those who attempt to create professional learning communities unless they appreciate the need for clear, constant communication in support of their objective.



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### Communication

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Furthermore, effective communication is not a product of eloquence or slick materials. Like any organization, schools communicate what is important to them and what is valued by what they focus on. In fact, Peters and Austin (1985) contend that "paying attention" is the only strategy available to any organization that hopes to communicate new commitments and priorities. Educators who are attempting to create a learning community can use the following eight-element communication audit to assess the focus of their attention and, thus, the effectiveness of their communication.

**1. What do we plan for?** When a school develops and articulates specific plans to advance its vision and values and achieve its goals, it sends the message that these areas are priorities. The preparation and public presentation of a plan signals that this issue is so significant that the school intends to be purposeful in pursuing it.

**2. What do we monitor?** In most organizations, what gets monitored gets done. When a school devotes considerable time and effort to the continual assessment of a particular condition or outcome, it notifies all members that the condition or outcome is considered important. Conversely, inattention to monitoring a particular factor in a school indicates that it is less than essential, regardless of how often its importance is verbalized.

Educators must not only establish procedures for monitoring, but they must also monitor the significant factors that are fundamental to a professional learning community. Virtually all schools have some systems for monitoring that are already in place. For example, schools typically devote considerable efforts to monitoring whether students are on time and in their seats. Unfortunately, they often are much less attentive to assessing whether the students' physical presence has resulted in the acquisition of intended knowledge and skills.

Teachers also learn what is important in their schools by observing what is monitored. The naive principal of one school focused on the number of students who raised their hands following a teacher's question. One enterprising teacher in this school worked out an arrangement with his students. Whenever the principal was visiting the class, if students knew the answer to a question, they were to raise their right hands; if they did not know the answer, they were to raise their left hands, but everyone was to raise a hand for every question. The principal consistently lauded the teacher as exemplary, despite the fact that he had no idea whether or not students were mastering the intended outcomes.

Similarly, some schools are vigilant in their efforts to monitor their teachers' use of the copier, the attractiveness of bulletin boards, or the adherence to dress codes. There is little to suggest that this kind of vigilance will enhance the effectiveness of those schools. *What* a school is monitoring is more important than *if* a school is monitoring. A professional learning community will focus on substantive issues and communicate the importance of those issues by:

1. Identifying the criteria with which it will monitor the advancement toward its vision, the presence of its values, and the accomplishment of its goals.
2. Systematically gathering information on those criteria.
3. Sharing data with the entire staff.
4. Engaging the entire staff in collective analysis of the information that is gathered.
5. Developing new strategies for achieving its objectives more effectively.
6. Carefully monitoring the results of implementing those strategies.



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**3. What questions do we ask?** The questions that an organization poses and pursues communicate priorities and point its people in a particular direction. Many school improvement initiatives are driven by such questions as "How can we get students to behave better?" "How can we persuade parents to assume greater responsibility for their children's learning?" or "What can we do to improve faculty morale?" While these are legitimate inquiries, they will not achieve the goal of advancing a school's capacity to function as a professional learning community. The questions posed by the building blocks of mission, vision, values, and goals advance this objective, but they, too, are insufficient.

All learning organizations are driven by the persistent questioning of the status quo and by a constant search for a better way to fulfill the organization's purpose more effectively. For schools, the focus of the driving questions must be enhanced student achievement. Schools that are in the habit of asking themselves tough questions that focus on the achievement of their students are cited by researchers as "the schools most likely to see significant gains as a result of their change efforts" (Wasley, Hampel, & Clark, 1995, p. 351).

Once a school has answered the questions that are posed when developing its mission, vision, values, and goals, it can help sustain its initiative to create a professional learning community by asking tough questions such as the following:

- Are we acting in accordance with our fundamental mission?
- Have we clarified what we want all students to know and be able to do?
- What is the most effective response for students who are not succeeding?

- What are the discrepancies between actual conditions in our school and the school we hope to become?
- What are our specific plans to reduce these discrepancies?
- Are the proposals under consideration consistent with our vision and values?
- What steps are we taking to advance vision and values in the day-to-day operation of the school?
- What results do we seek, and what evidence are we gathering to assess our effectiveness?
- Have we established systematic collaboration as the norm in our school?
- Are there more effective ways to fulfill our mission, vision, and values?

**4. What do we model?** One of the best strategies for communicating what is important within an organization is modeling. It is said that people communicate most eloquently through their actions, not through their words. To paraphrase Ralph Waldo Emerson, "What you do thunders above you so loudly all the while, I cannot hear what you say." If teachers encourage students to become lifelong learners but provide no evidence of their own intellectual curiosity, if principals extol the virtues of collaboration but use autocratic leadership styles, if superintendents advocate innovation and risk-taking but punish those whose experiments fail to produce the desired results, then the incongruity between words and actions will inevitably result in cynicism. Students are more likely to function as continuous learners and effective collaborators if their teachers demonstrate those characteristics. Teachers are more likely to work collaboratively if their principals engage them in collaborative decision making. Principals are more likely to



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Modeling is particularly critical for those who lead a change effort. In describing the conditions necessary to build a learning organization in the private sector, Thompson (1995) argues that the modeling of leaders is "the single most powerful mechanism for creating a learning environment" (p. 96). Chapter 9 will elaborate on the importance of modeling by the principal.

**5. How do we allocate our time?** The allocation of time is one of the truest tests of what is really important in any organization. The time devoted to an issue on both the annual calendar and within the daily schedule of an organization tells its people what is really valued.

Providing school personnel with adequate time to work through the problems associated with change is a crucial factor in successful reform (Klein et al., 1996). When teachers are expected to implement substantive changes at the same time that they manage everything else in their already overburdened schedules, there is little chance that the initiatives will be sustained. Nevertheless, the time essential for reform is often not made readily available for school personnel (Adelman & Panton Walking Eagle, 1997).

Some school administrators tend to say, in effect, that "the implementation of our new vision is critical, so do everything else you have always done and then figure out on your own how to address the vision, too." Or, "Collaboration is valued in our school, so see if you can find some time to collaborate." The real message conveyed in these situations is unmistakable. Teachers and principals will know a district is serious about transforming schools into professional learning communities only when they are given the time they need to handle the complexity of that task.

**6. What do we celebrate?** Regardless of the eloquence of vision and values statements, those statements will not have an impact on people in a school unless progress toward the vision is apparent and unless the implementation of the values is recognized and celebrated on a consistent basis. When reaching a milestone in the journey toward the vision is noted and celebrated, and when examples of the commitment to values are publicly acknowledged and rewarded, everyone in the school is reminded that vision and values are important.

Schools can develop ceremonies and rituals to provide faculty with evidence that their efforts are making a difference. Such public recognition offers real-life examples by which members of the staff can assess their own commitment to vision and values. Celebration represents a powerful instrument for shaping the culture of a professional learning community. This topic will be addressed in greater detail in Chapter 7.

**7. What are we willing to confront?** If the vision and values of the school are to be communicated in a clear and unequivocal manner, those who violate the vision and values must be confronted. In an ideal world, every member of the staff would be willing to challenge a colleague who was acting in a way that was contrary to collective commitments. In the real world of schools, this task will most likely fall to principals.

It is critical that principals fulfill this leadership responsibility if vision and values are to be reinforced. If a school claims to value an orderly atmosphere conducive to learning, the principal must be prepared to confront the unruly student, the teacher who ignores such behavior, or the parent who seeks to justify it. If teachers have agreed, for example, that working in collaborative teams is essential to becoming a professional learning community, the principal must be willing to insist that a teacher who works in isolation change his or her behavior.



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Principals who are unwilling to defend and protect the vision and values of their schools put improvement initiatives at risk. The school suffers when individuals are free to act in a manner that the staff as a whole has agreed is contrary to the school's best interest. The principal suffers because his or her credibility as a leader is diminished by an unwillingness to address an obvious problem. The individual who is acting inappropriately suffers because he or she has been deprived of an opportunity for learning and growth. Most important, the improvement initiative suffers because the staff will soon come to recognize that the principal assigns a higher priority to avoiding conflict than to advancing vision and values.

This notion of confrontation may seem antithetical to a proposal for schools built upon shared visions and collaborative relationships, but we believe it is consistent with the idea that if schools are to improve, individuals must fulfill their respective responsibilities and commitments. The message from both research and practice is clear: Change efforts stall when leaders do not address violations of vision and values (Burns, 1978; Kotter, 1996; Maxwell, 1995; Peters & Austin, 1985).

It is understandable that principals feel the basic human desire to secure the approval of their co-workers; however, they must care more about advancing shared vision and values than they do about constant approval. What James McGregor Burns (1978) said about leaders in general applies specifically to principals: they "must settle for far less than universal affection . . . They must accept conflict. They must be willing and able to be unloved" (p. 34).

Confrontation is not, however, synonymous with personal attack. Maxwell (1995) offers the following guidelines for confrontation:

1. Conduct the discussion as soon as possible.

2. Focus on the behavior or action, not the person.
3. Be specific.
4. Give the person an opportunity to respond and grant the benefit of the doubt.
5. Avoid sarcasm and words such as "always" and "never."
6. Attempt to develop a mutual plan to address the problem.
7. Affirm the person. (pp. 126-127)

It is almost always preferable for a principal to hold a face-to-face meeting for this purpose rather than to write a memorandum. The managerial maxim, "reprimand in person but praise in writing," has considerable merit. A meeting provides an opportunity not only for honest dialogue but also for a better understanding of perspectives. It gives the principal the opportunity to say, "Here is what we agreed to do as a faculty. This is what I see you doing that is contrary to that agreement. We need this change from you in order for you to help us achieve our collective goals. What can I do to help you make the necessary change?"

**8. Keep it simple.** One of the most effective strategies for clear communication is the KISS principle (keep it simple, stupid). Educators should not be expected to memorize their school's mission, vision, values, and goal statements. The message of change must be simplified and amplified. Metaphors, analogies, logos, and examples can present verbal pictures of a change initiative more effectively than pages of text.

In fact, Bennis and Nanus (1985) advise those seeking to assess the effectiveness of their communication to ask, "How clear is the metaphor?" A high school faculty that developed a vision statement based on the belief that the school had an obligation to meet the needs of each student expressed their commitment in a new school slogan, "Success for Every Student."



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That simple slogan gave voice to a new guiding principle and served as a benchmark for improvement initiatives. Elementary school teachers who emphasized providing students with a nurturing environment referred to their school as "The Little School with the Big Heart" and created a ubiquitous logo of a schoolhouse encasing a huge heart. Another elementary school created a logo with pictures in each quadrant that represented key aspects of the school's vision statement—joining hands, opening minds, touching hearts, and creating the future for our children.

An initiative to transform a school into a learning community is certain to sputter and stall unless its importance is communicated throughout the school on a daily basis. Effective communication can help sustain the effort, but effective communication requires constant repetition. Mission, vision, values, and goals must be continually referenced in the day-to-day workings of the school. Redundancy is not only permissible—it is desirable.

### Sustaining the Change Initiative through Collaboration

Despite the unceasing waves of reforms that have washed up on the public schools, the fundamental facts of teaching seem to have changed very little. The task of teaching continues to fall to a single individual who stands alone before a group of students and works in isolation. Teaching has been described as the second most private act in which adults engage. In fact, schools have been characterized by some critics of public education as little more than independent kingdoms (classrooms) ruled by autonomous feudal lords (teachers) who are united only by a common parking lot.

The fact that there is considerable truth in this metaphorical picture should be cause for alarm. Donahoe (1993) describes schools as "convenient places for a bunch of individual teachers,

like independent contractors, to come to teach discrete groups of children" (p. 299). Sarason (1996) contends that schools foster a culture of individuals rather than the culture of a group. He concludes that teachers are apt to focus on their personal concerns because there are absolutely no forums or traditions that present them with opportunities to come together to discuss the practical problems and issues of the classroom and the school. Linda Darling-Hammond (1995) presents a similar conclusion when she writes, "Separated by their classrooms and packed teaching schedules, teachers rarely work or talk together about teaching practices" (p. 172). Many teachers feel this sense of isolation and report that one of their greatest sources of dissatisfaction is their perception that they scarcely know their colleagues and have little time to discuss issues related to curriculum and instruction (Poplin & Weeres, 1992).

The way a former high school English teacher describes his experience rings true for many teachers:

*The crush of . . . our myriad daily events and duties kept us from collaborating on such obvious and challenging concerns as how to teach composition more effectively, how to conduct discussions about literature more effectively, and how to make literature more exciting. We did not know if or how anyone was teaching composition—or even what that meant. So we worked, consciously or unconsciously, toward our own goals, within the limitations of what each of us knew or did not know. Day-to-day concerns kept us from reflecting on what our most important goals should be.* (Schmoker, 1996, pp. 10–11)

This isolation of teachers presents one of the most formidable roadblocks to creating a professional learning community. Although a lone teacher can impart the causes of the Civil War,



the rules of grammar, or multiplication tables, transforming a school into a professional learning community is a collective endeavor. Collaborative structures support that endeavor because they:

- Enable teachers to test their ideas about teaching and expand their level of expertise by allowing them to hear the ideas of others (Wildman & Niles, 1987).
- Foster better decisions and increase the likelihood of ownership in the decisions (Dillon-Peterson, 1986).
- Help to reduce the fear of risk-taking by providing encouragement and moral support (Fielding & Schalock, 1985).
- Can be linked to gains in achievement; higher quality solutions to problems; increased confidence among all members of the school community; more systematic assistance to beginning teachers; and an increased pool of ideas, materials, and methods (Little, 1990).
- Reinforce changes in school culture and commitment to improvement initiatives (Klein et al., 1996).

Creating a collaborative environment has been described as "the single most important factor" for successful school improvement initiatives and "the first order of business" for those seeking to enhance the effectiveness of their school (Eastwood & Louis, 1992, p. 215). Virtually all contemporary school reformers call for increased opportunities for teacher collaboration.

It is clear that the effort to transform a school into a professional learning community is more likely to be sustained when teachers participate in reflective dialogue; observe and react to one another's teaching; jointly develop curriculum and assessment practices; work together to implement new programs and strategies; share lesson plans and materials; and collectively

engage in problem solving, action research, and continuous improvement practices. Unfortunately, the tradition of teacher isolation is still so entrenched in schools that fostering meaningful collaboration is a significant challenge.

### **Collaboration by Invitation Does Not Work**

Here is a true story. In his first presentation to the faculty, a newly appointed high school principal expressed his desire to foster collaboration among staff. He then made an extraordinary commitment: whenever two or more teachers wanted time to collaborate on matters related to teaching and learning, he would provide them with time during the school day to do so. He promised that he would arrange for substitute teachers for a morning, for a day, or even for several days to allow teams of teachers or entire departments to work together. The offer received a warm response from the faculty, and the principal received a great deal of positive feedback from teachers who expressed appreciation for the fact that the school finally had a leader who recognized the importance of teachers working together. The principal basked in the knowledge that he had acted as an enlightened education leader. But at the year's end, he was confronted with a grim reality: not a single teacher from a faculty of over 100 teachers had taken advantage of the offer of released time for collaborating with colleagues!

This story contains an important lesson: the isolation of teachers is so ingrained in the traditional culture of schools that invitations to collaborate are insufficient. To build professional learning communities, meaningful collaboration must be systematically embedded into the daily life of the school.

### **Collaborative Teams**

The best structure for fostering collaboration is the team—"the basic building block of the intelligent organization" (Pinchot



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& Pinchot 1993, p. 66) and the "essence of a learning organization" (Dilworth, 1995, p. 252). Senge et al. (1994) contend that "history has brought us to a moment where teams are recognized as a critical component of every enterprise—the predominant unit for decision making and getting things done" (p. 354). Arranging personnel into teams has also been identified as an important factor linked to the process of improving schools (Darling-Hammond, 1996; Newmann, 1996). Building collaborative cultures requires that schools create structures to ensure that every staff member is assigned to a team that works together on substantive issues.

There are a number of ways that the team concept can be implemented in schools to promote collaboration. Here are some examples:

**Implement team concept by grade level or subject.** All teachers who share the same teaching assignment in a building (for example, all the third-grade teachers in an elementary school or all the biology teachers in a high school) can be grouped into a team that is responsible for identifying curriculum outcomes, assessing student achievement, selecting instructional materials, planning and presenting staff development programs, participating in peer observation and coaching, developing schedules, hiring new staff, or serving as mentors for new colleagues. In very small schools with only a single teacher for a grade level or subject, the teams can be formed according to several grade levels (kindergarten through third grade) or according to discipline (science teachers).

**Implement team concept on the basis of shared students.** Interdisciplinary teams can be created on the basis of shared students. These teams could focus not only on curriculum content, but also on the needs of a common group of students.

**Implement team concept in schoolwide task forces.** Teams of staff members can be created periodically to consider a particular problem, develop recommendations for resolving it, and share their findings with the rest of the faculty.

**Implement team concept by area of professional development.** Teachers can be formed into teams to pursue training in a given area of professional development. For example, teachers interested in applying cooperative learning techniques in their classrooms could meet as a team to react to presentations on the topic, develop strategies for using the technique in the classroom, share related articles, plan peer observation and feedback sessions, or serve as a support group that discusses and analyzes successes and setbacks in its attempt to use the new technique.

But it is important to remember that creating configurations for teams does not ensure an effectively functioning team. Giving an English teacher, a mathematics teacher, a science teacher, and a social studies teacher responsibility for the same group of students does not necessarily establish an interdisciplinary team; it merely creates a group comprised of four teachers from different disciplines! Certain conditions must be present if this group is to operate as a capable, collaborative team. After working with more than 150 teams over an eight-year period, Dukewits and Gowin (1996) concluded that effective teams are characterized by:

1. Shared beliefs and attitudes.
2. High levels of trust that in turn result in open communication, mutual respect for people and opinions, and a willingness to participate.
3. The belief that they had the authority to make important decisions and a willingness to assume responsibility for the decisions they made.



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4. Effectively managed meetings with clear operational norms or ground rules, agendas developed with input from all, defined roles for members, and minutes to provide continuity.
5. Ongoing assessment of and discussions regarding the functioning of the team.

To create effective collaborative teams, educators must address at least four prerequisites:

**1. Time for collaboration must be built into the school day and year.** The way in which a school structures its time can have a tremendous impact upon commitment to a change process. This fact is often overlooked in school improvement initiatives. Typically, if teachers are given any time to collaborate on improvement projects, the time is offered as an add-on (after school or on Saturdays) rather than incorporated as an integral part of the school day.

The lack of time for collaboration is a product of the factory model upon which schools were organized. The American vision of teaching has traditionally called for teachers to instruct large groups of students for virtually the entire school day. Thus, the other tasks of teaching—preparation, planning, curriculum development, collaborating with colleagues, etc—are often deemed to be so unimportant that little or no time is provided for them (Darling-Hammond, 1995). Time for reflection and discussion has traditionally been viewed as unproductive in the educational arena. Therefore, teachers are not usually given time to collaborate because it would give them less time with their students. And so most educators continue to work in isolation—a situation that reduces their effectiveness. But because the traditional view assumes that productivity is a function of activity, or contact hours, the traditional response to unsatisfactory results calls upon teachers to teach more hours in the day

or more days in the year. Clearly, this logic is flawed, even when considered from the perspective of the factory model. If an assembly line were producing defective products, an appropriate response would be to examine the process and improve it, not run the line an extra hour each day or an extra month each year.

The distinction that is frequently drawn between thinking and doing in education does not seem to prevail in other professions. Attorneys recognize that their effectiveness in the courtroom will depend, to a large degree, upon the thoroughness of their preparation. Physicians routinely consult with other doctors in deciding the most appropriate treatment for a patient. The quality initiative in the private sector has demonstrated the benefit of providing employees with time to discuss how to do things better. Even so, Americans tend to regard any time that a teacher is not standing in front of a class as "down time."

Ironically, American teachers already spend more time in the classroom per week than teachers in Europe and Asia (Consortium on Productivity in the Schools, 1995; Darling-Hammond, 1995; Perkins, 1992). Teachers in Japan, China, France, Switzerland, England, and Germany teach students only 15 to 20 hours out of a 40- to 45-hour work week. The rest of the time is available for them to think about and discuss the lessons they teach; to share plans, materials, and ideas; to tutor students; or to consult with parents.

The schools that are successful in implementing significant change regard collaborative time for teachers as a critical resource—an essential tool that enables teachers to enhance their individual and collective effectiveness (Louis, Kruse, & Marks, 1996). One of the key recommendations from the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (1996)



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calls for providing teachers with regularly scheduled time for collegial work and planning. The school that hopes to become a professional learning community must provide teachers with time to reflect, to engage in collective inquiry, to collaborate, and to participate in continuous improvement processes. It will regard these activities as productive and will provide time for them in a systematic way. By providing this time, the school will help sustain the improvement initiative.

## **2. The purpose of collaboration must be made explicit.**

Forming teams is a means to an end, not the end itself. A team is a group of people who need each other to accomplish an objective. Four individuals who are on an elevator do not represent a team. If the elevator breaks down between floors and the passengers must plan and work together to escape, they begin to function not as a group, but as a team. Teams are most effective when they are clear about the results they are to achieve. This clarity of purpose is enhanced when teams are provided with clearly stated performance goals that indicate what the team is to produce or accomplish. For example, teams might be given the following tasks to complete over the course of two or three years:

- A. Review the curriculum guidelines of our state and the recommendations of the national professional association in your subject area. Compare our curriculum to the state and national recommendations. Are there gaps between what is recommended and what is taught in our school? If so, what are they and how should we respond? Use the following format to present your findings.

### Report on Curriculum Analysis

Briefly summarize the state or national curricular goals for your grade level or course that are not addressed adequately in our local curriculum.

Briefly summarize areas taught in our local curriculum that are not called for in the state or national recommendations.

What is your team's recommendation? Should we take steps to address any of the discrepancies?

Please explain the rationale for your recommendation.

If you are recommending additional objectives for our curriculum, you should identify existing areas that might be eliminated or given less emphasis in order to provide your team with enough time to address the additional content.

- B. Develop a common course description to be presented to all students enrolled in your course in order to help them understand its major purpose, the intended outcomes, and the criteria for assessment. (Note that elementary school teams should focus on grade-level goals and outcomes for each subject and will write their descriptions for parents rather than for students.)
- C. Develop and present a common comprehensive assessment for your students. Include a brief explanation of the proficiency levels that you anticipate students will achieve for each major outcome.
- D. Analyze the results of your common assessment of students. Where did students fail to meet the proficiency



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levels that you had anticipated? Identify your strategies to address any discrepancy.

- E. Review the attached samples of student work. Working individually, assign a grade for each sample. Then, as a team, compare the grades you have assigned and discuss the criteria that you used in determining your grades. Develop and present a rubric that the team will apply to student work.
- F. Review the attached article on effective teaching. Discuss your reactions. Do you concur with the premise of the article? Why or why not?

It is important to remember that collaboration is not a natural act in the traditional culture of American education in which teachers work in isolation. Thus, providing a team of teachers with explicit questions to consider and tasks to accomplish will give team members the sense of direction and the confidence they need as they begin to work together.

**3. School personnel need training and support to be effective collaborators.** In their effort to foster a collaborative culture, educators must not lose sight of the fact that collaboration is a morally neutral activity. Providing teachers with time for collaboration does not ensure that they will engage in deep discourse about how they can achieve the goals of the school more effectively. In fact, without the proper training, much of what occurs in schools in the name of collaboration can be counterproductive (Little, 1990). In the wrong school culture, the time set aside for educators to work together will simply reinforce the negative aspects of that culture.

First and foremost, the potential benefits of collaboration will never be realized unless educators work together in matters directly related to teaching and learning. The focus of their efforts and inquiry must be instruction, curriculum, assessment

practices, and strategies for improving the effectiveness of the school. Structuring the process so that teachers work together to answer an engaging question or to present a product can help provide the clear focus and goal orientation essential to the process. But even with clear goals and the best of intentions, teachers may struggle initially as a school moves toward embracing a more collaborative environment.

A professional learning community requires a great deal of its members. It requires them to change their traditional behavior! Anyone who has ever tried to stop smoking or to adhere to a new diet knows very well that changing behavior is difficult. Simply exhorting teachers to collaborate is insufficient. Educators are likely to require considerable training in group processes and continued reinforcement in order to develop skills as collaborators.

Asking teams to reach consensus on the following questions can help team members address potential problems and increase the likelihood of teams developing the necessary clarity and skills to work well together:

- What are our expectations for how our team will operate?
- What are our two or three most important goals this year?
- What indicators will we use to assess the effectiveness of our team?
- What process will we use to resolve conflict?

Teams should establish norms for their operation. Members might discuss the following suggested commitments:

- We will articulate our specific commitments to the team and will fulfill those commitments.
- We will work toward consensus.



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- We will solicit, consider, and value the input of each team member. No individual will be allowed to dominate the discussion, nor will one individual be expected to carry the workload of the team.
- We will be candid and will seek to understand one another by articulating and investigating the reasoning behind our respective positions. We will assume our colleagues have good intentions even if we disagree with them.
- We will attend all meetings.
- We will support a decision once it is clear that there is a consensus for it.

Once team members have been working together for a while, they should be asked to reflect on how the team is functioning. This reflection can be prompted by asking each member to consider the following:

- A team committed to serious inquiry requires open communication. An environment must be created in which each member feels that his or her suggestions will be given serious consideration by the group. How would you describe the status of open communication on your team?
- Review the expectations and goals for your team that you developed when the team was formed. Rate your team's effectiveness on a scale of 1 (low) to 10 (high) for each statement of expectations and goals.
- Identify an example of your team's exceeding an expectation or goal this year.
- Identify an example of your team's failing to meet an expectation or achieve a goal this year. Should this area be addressed next year? If so, how?

- What is the most positive aspect of being a member of this team?
- What is the most frustrating aspect of being a member of this team?
- What are your ideas for improving the team's effectiveness in the future?

Sometimes teams are assessed on the basis of congeniality alone—whether team members get along and how cordial they are to one another. While civility can lubricate the workings of a team, it most definitely does not ensure a team's effectiveness. Conversely, serious debates and arguments within a team do not suggest that it is malfunctioning. Collaborators can disagree without being disagreeable, and individuals often require different perspectives before they gain new insight.

Sustaining an improvement initiative, therefore, requires much more than congeniality. It requires the common goals, collective efforts, and shared insights of people deeply engaged in the analysis of their current practice and behavior. But even with those elements in place, the process of learning as a team will be an unfamiliar one that is likely to be stressful for participants. It is important to keep in mind that team members are, first and foremost, human beings. One of the first skills members should learn is "the art of forgiveness" (Senge et al., 1994, p. 356).

**4. Educators must accept their responsibility to work together as true professional colleagues.** Even if teachers have the time, structure, and training to engage in collaboration, one prerequisite remains—they must acknowledge their responsibility to do so. Educators often bemoan their lack of opportunity to work together, but little will change unless they also acknowledge that they have contributed to the problem. As Barth (1991) writes:



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*God didn't create self-contained classrooms, fifty minute periods, and subjects taught in isolation. We did—because we find working alone safer than and preferable to working together. (p. 128)*

In his study of the characteristics that contribute to successful individuals, Sternberg (1996) concludes that successful people accept responsibility for their lives. They are self-motivated; above all else, they have a sense of self-efficacy and an internal locus of control. They believe that they can achieve their goals and improve their situations through their own efforts. Even when presented with obstacles or personal difficulties, they do not resort to self-pity or use their problems as an excuse for failure to act. Instead, they persist in their efforts. What is true of individuals is also true of organizations. No factor is more significant in a school's change process than the faculty's sense of self-efficacy (Sagor, 1997). The schools most likely to create a collaborative learning community are those with educators who are willing to accept responsibility for doing so.

### Summary

The challenge of sustaining the change process is the challenge of creating a critical mass of educators within the school who are willing and able to function as change agents. Creating this critical mass requires attention to the three Cs of sustaining a change initiative—communication, collaboration, and culture.

The importance of communication has emerged from research on innovation. Inattention to communication is a leading cause of the failure of change efforts. The most effective strategy of communication is attention. Paying attention to the core values of the school is the most important way for leaders to communicate effectively. Often leaders verbally express one set of values, but then pay attention to other things as they routinely do their jobs. Schools that hope to become professional

learning communities must examine what they are being attentive to: what do they plan for, what do they monitor, what questions do they ask and investigate, what do they model, what do they celebrate, what are they willing to confront, and how do they allocate their time? Furthermore, schools should simplify their message and encourage people to rally around a few key ideas through the use of metaphors, slogans, logos, and stories. Finally, they must continue to communicate the significance of the school's mission, vision, values, and goals on a daily basis, forever.

Creating a collaborative environment has been called the single most important factor in sustaining the effort to create a learning community. Collaboration by invitation is ineffective; meaningful collaboration must be embedded into the daily life of the school. Creating teams is one of the most effective ways to promote such collaboration, but for teams to become part of a school's culture, four prerequisites must be met. First, time for collaboration must be built into the school day and year. Second, the purpose of collaboration must be made explicit, and structures must be provided to facilitate it. Third, educators must be trained and supported in their efforts to become effective collaborators. Fourth, educators must accept their individual and collective responsibilities for working together as true professional colleagues.

